DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 020 CS 210 321

AUTHOR Page, Miriam Dempsey
TITLE "Thick Description" and a Rhetoric of Inquiry: Freshmen and Their Major Fields.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Exploration; College Freshmen; Curriculum Development; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Majors (Students); *Research Papers (Students); *Teaching Methods; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS University of Iowa

ABSTRACT

A field of study sequence designed at the University of Iowa to introduce the research paper to freshman rhetoric students encourages them to view themselves as interpretive anthropologists entering a strange culture and exploring their declared majors or areas of special interest. Each student is responsible for (1) writing an essay in response to a journal article pertaining to a chosen field; (2) preparing an oral report on "something new" happening in this field to reinforce an understanding of expository discourse; (3) identifying some controversial issue or problem in the field and seeking a solution; (4) analyzing the process used to arrive at the solution; (5) keeping a journal of observations and research; and (6) selecting a culminating "self-assignment" in which to create individual ways of becoming familiar with the people, ideas, and practices of the chosen field. For this final phase, students actually participate in their field of interest through a self-directed project. The experience in the field at this early stage allows and affirms the validity of the student's questions and ideas before too much dogma precludes them. (AEW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED279020

Miriam Dempsey Page
University of Iowa

"Thick Description" and a Rhetoric of Inquiry: Freshmen and Their Major Fields

Five years ago at the University of Iowa I developed a field sequence in my freshman rhetoric classes. It made good sense to me to invite the entering college students, also in most cases inexperienced writers, to explore their declared majors, or, if open majors, fields of special interest. There was no intention to expect the students to become professionals overnight. The emphasis is on exploration and dialogue or dialectic--a questioning posture. A value of the sequence is that it allows the student an opportunity to see if he or she wants to stay with the major. Occasionally, I have a student who decides during the sequence to change to another field.

There was no intention to celebrate specialization of fields that too often neatly and mistakenly pigeonhole themselves. Rather, the invitation is one that encourages each newcomer to do self-involving research and ask real questions because the topic area holds at least for a time intense personal interest for him or her.

CS210321

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Miriam Dempsey Page

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Inviting exploration for a time in the major field or a field of special interest reduces the strangeness of dipping into areas of knowledge that seem far removed from the experiences that the student has had to this point. The sequence is a good way to introduce the research paper. The choice of the field of interest assumes talent, specially developed abilities, keen interest, or connections through friends or family to the area, so the academic prose becomes an extension of personal experience writing in the journal and other early pieces in the course. In short, the student's voice is not lost in the transition to the more academic writing.

The field sequence deeply enhances the earlier writing because of the ongoing anthropological metaphor of "thick description" and a rhetoric of inquiry in my composition classes. Based on the work of interpretive anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, particularly his essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973), our approach to writing is in terms of his approach to writing culture--a network of relationships and layers of meaning, including, of course, the qualifications to what may appear or not appear to be the case. Writing for us, as for Geertz, is a process of considering multi-levels of interpretation in the rhetorical situation or context. A wink, for example,

says Geertz in "Thick Description," can mean many things, depending on intention and perspective. Geertz sees culture as an assemblage of texts to be deeply read. In his 1980 ethnography, NEGARA, he criticizes what he calls "survey ethnography" or "the bird's-eye view" (51). In attempting to compose the complexity of their experience and the world about them the student writers likewise come to see themselves as interpretive anthropologists, so to speak, assuming this tenuous, expectant relationship of "thick description" and a rhetoric of inquiry with the elusive story they try to tell. As they move from the more familiar experience to that of the field of special interest, the metaphor is even more revealing in terms of "thick description" and inquiry. The students are in effect entering a strange "culture" and become ethnographers for a time. As Geertz, what concerns the newcomers most in the field is "translation," trying to figure out what the people of this culture think they're up to (to paraphrase Geertz). The trick, he says, is not to establish some inner correspondence of spirit, but dialogue, reciprocal impact. Geertz describes this deep writing/deep reading as socially constructed meaning that comes about when we locate ourselves in the community of those whose story we write. Writing and reading can never be monological, he suggests, but

are always in terms of shared cultural and social contexts, a community of shared experience in composing meaning, if meaning is to be found.

So I invite the newcomers to enter their fields--not just to read the literature, but to meet the people and to participate in self-designed projects in the field. A journal accompanies all of the activity in the sequence to provide a risk-free place for exploring ideas and strange concepts. Although the sequence in my class moves in an increasingly complex spiral--from early conversations to more sophisticated ones, from early sampling in the literature to more deliberate choices in exploring and reacting--I see the parts also as simultaneous, particularly the ongoing project for participation in the field. The student's interests and needs dictate the emphases, the direction, and the pace. Flexibility is the key to allow the student to create his or her own learning and thinking in the field.

T introduce the field sequence with the following handout to refocus or recast the issue of "thick description" that has been primary from the beginning of the course but in more subtle ways. (I should note here that the field sequence could be the entire course, but most often I lead into it from journal writing and a series of personal

writings about uniqueness or a series of place pieces.)

The handout reads:

A Note to You as You Begin to Explore Your Field

****

"Thick Description" and a Rhetoric of Inquiry

****

In entering your chosen field you become an ethnographer, composing or shaping your experience of what may seem at first a strange "culture." As you begin to meet the people, read the literature, formulate your own questions, and form concepts, you cross the threshold, however, into an exciting world of knowledge where you also can create.

The professionals in your field have much to share with you, so record your activity and plan your questions carefully. An important thing to remember, though, is that you as a newcomer have something worth saying. Approach the talks with professionals as conversations, not as interviews.

For the journal you will begin to keep as you enter your field, I recommend three sections: (1)Questions (2) Bibliography, and (3) Exploratory Writing.

"Thick description" begins with a question that looks below the surface to deeper levels of meaning.

One question leads to many others that uncover the many implications or sides to an issue. Instead of seeing an isolated event or problem or whatever you are writing about, you see it in context or community. The event or the problem, for example, becomes a sign or a symbol of a larger network of meaning, which also includes the differing perspectives of what you write about. Instead of preposing a rigid outline before you write set for yourself leading questions and categories or groups of questions. Your questions will grow and change as you learn more about the topic, become more of an "insider." One large question will lead to subsets, and so on. You will find yourself developing families of questions that will sharpen a focus or broaden the issue.

Also, consider cognate (related) fields of study. What are the questions that need to be asked (as far as you know right now) that come from related disciplines? (You might even set up a section in your journal for related-field questions.) Always remember that meaning is socially constructed. The different disciplines blur or borrow from each other all the time.

A last (but not least) consideration: What difference does audience make in your treatment of the material? Is audience part of the context of the writing? How does the audience's interpretation relate to your own questions and discoveries or to the perspectives of those whom you write about?

One additional request: For each piece that you write in the sequence would you explore carefully in "Writing about My Writing" (one page attached) how "thick description" and your rhetoric of inquiry helped you compose the piece?

I. Finding a Common Ground

The first assignment that I make after getting the students started in their journals is to ask the students to become familiar with some of the literature of the field. The writing invitation is to respond to an essay (preferably current) in a leading journal in the field. Of course, some of the language and articles will be too specialized or technical for the newcomer. The point is the search for and identification with a piece of writing the newcomer can understand. Finding a common ground, suggests Peter Winch (1977), is the first step toward further creative response in the field. The request also is to stimulate the student to read further.

What is really revealing are responses to follow-up questions in small-group discussion on the day the essay is due. Each student is asked to read his or her essay to a small group, clarify the ways he or she uses the journal article as a point of departure, and seek suggestions from group members on ways the source can be integrated better. This automatically involves a statement of the main premise of the journal piece and the ways in which the student writer departs from it in response or reaction. Of course, a similar method has been used with the essays from a reader with the earlier writing before the field sequence, but the difference now is the exploration and discovery of new insights in an area of intense interest and relevance--the major field or a field of special interest.

After the group discussion, I ask the students to take the first draft home and consider possible revisions to more tightly unify it, integrate the outside source, or make other changes that they and the group have decided it needs. The "writing-as-process" follow-up in a workshop setting enhances and perhaps clarifies with the language of peer response some of the ideas that might seem too new or advanced for the student to grasp.

II. Reporting Something New from the Field

The assignment that follows asks for a report on something "new that is happening in your field." The value of the request is the exploration that must follow if the student is to come back to the class to report on anything new. At the University of Iowa we combine reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the rhetoric course, so the report in my class is spoken. The assignment could easily be adapted to writing, however, with the discussion in the workshop providing a forum for the cross-curricular exchange of innovation in the fields. Student responses to this assignment through the five-year period have included everything from biomechanics to computers. This past semester (Fall, 1986) our class braved through graphic slides on bonding, a new dental technique, heard about the merits of laser techniques and fiber optics in telecommunications from an engineering student from Hong Kong, heard about new designs for more efficient computer systems in helicopters from an Israeli fighter pilot returning to school, explored the possibilities of dream research with a psychology major, and considered the advantages and disadvantages of Mutual Funds with a talented stock exchange buff--all newcomers

to their fields.

The one requirement for the "Something New" report is that it be about innovation in the field or fresh perspectives, new ways or techniques of seeing the old. The assignment is a good way to reinforce an understanding of expository discourse, which at best is informative, exploratory, and original.

III. Exploring Controversial Issues or Problem Areas in the Field

The next assignment invites the student to select some controversial issue or problem that needs to be solved in the field and seek a solution (or solutions). (I do add a qualification that problems may not have obvious solutions, if a solution is to be found at all. Exploring the problem without an overload of conventions is the point.) In order to discover a problem the student has to do further reading or talk to professionals in the field, unless he or she has already become active in the field. The problem can be real or hypothetical, but the strategy behind the assignment is to have the student work through it on paper, shaping his/her experience of the problem in language. I also encourage embedding visual aids where necessary (numerical systems, charts, graphs, musical notation, maps, tables, designs, and so on, depending on the symbol-systems in the field).

As a follow-up to the problem-solving piece I ask for a reflective analysis of what the students have written, or, rather, the process by which they arrived at their possible solution, describing alternatives they considered and their reasons for choosing the one that they finally settled on. Also, for those who might have had some difficulty managing the first problem-solving exercise, I invite them to try a revision or a new problem.

My two classes during the fall semester, 1986, focused more on this part of the sequence than any other. For an extensive research piece on a controversial issue in their fields I asked the students to also keep an accompanying journal in which the centerpiece was the questions or observations leading to and from the research and the writing both in the journal and the final draft. The following are two examples of the careful way in which most of the students approached this assignment.

One student did a study of employee theft, a fascinating study and a problem many are not aware of. The focus of the paper was on the theft of raw materials and finished products. Note the direction his questions take, particularly the funneling process (although they are rambling and exploratory).

> What major problems are there in business?
>
> Is employee theft a large problem?
>
> What causes it?

Who does it?

Can it be stopped?

Why do companies let it go on?

Who figures the total cost of employee theft?

How do they do it?

How many job applicants do they usually check up on?

.....

Is employee theft on the rise?

Do the solutions work?

No attempt is made to curb the student's seemingly unending questions. They are an important self-created heuristic that can lead to other projects, later research beyond the course. The point is to log them for now in the journal. The filtering process here leads finally to a focus, however, that draws many of these questions in.

Now consider the way this student begins the final draft:

> Many of us give little consideration or importance to employee theft although it is of great importance to those in the business world. But it also should be important to those outside the business world because of the consequences it can cause, namely the costs passed on to consumers through employee theft. The problem of employee theft is on the rise and managers are doing all they can to stop it.

> They may try to stop it, but in many cases that is impossible. Just slowing it down a little is considered a victory. Employee theft is an enormous and complex problem with no simple solutions, as you will see.

And he proceeds through a twelve-page paper with an extensive bibliography, including three conversations with professionals in the business world (a professor; a president (his father) of a milling company; and a manager (his uncle) of the grain division for a national distributor of animal feeds.

In a postscript of "Observations" he writes:

> Some people...feel there is very little that can be done. Some feel that it's the cost of doing business. Others, like my uncle, feel that they must do as much as they can to stop it. Employee theft going uncaught will breed more employee theft.
> Most of my friends have no interest in this. A lot of people don't know how big a problem it is.
> Each company has its own problems.
> I think there should be a class taught or a portion of a class that deals specifically with employee theft.
> ....If I manage a company, one of my main goals would be to eliminate employee theft.

He closes with "Writing about My Writing":

> I wrote this informative paper for those who have an interest in business and have some knowledge of business. This is a serious paper dealing with the problem, its causes, its effects, solutions, and results of the solutions. I really learned a lot about employee theft and surely could have written more. ...Those that don't particularly care about business problems may find this paper boring, but to me it's fascinating. It's hard to believe that it's that big a problem, but it is. This paper has helped me gain knowledge in this area and surely some day I will have to face problems similar to those in my paper.

Another student, a Viet Nam War veteran, who is a recovering substance abuser, had this to say about the direction his questions took him on his topic, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

> The questions: What problem most confronts vets today?
> What is PTSD and whom does it affect?
> What are the symptoms of PTSD and how do they affect us?
> What other mental or psychological problems exist?
> How are they treated?

The comment: These were some of the questions T prepared as I went to the VA hospital. ...and from these questions it led to a group discussion of PTSD and Substance Abuse. Among those present were vets suffering from PTSD and staff members of the hospital whom I had previously known while I was a patient there.

His "Writing about My Writing":

The reason I chose to write about the subject T did is #1 because I am a Viet Nam Vet who proudly served his country and have had personal experience in relating with this issue. I came home from the service and experienced many of the problems I wrote about and am only now actually recovering from them. I came home an alcoholic and a substance abuser and finally got to a point where something had to happen. T found out about the Vets Center in Des Moines and sought help to overcome my addictions and other personal problems. Since that time 11 months and 10 days ago I now have maintained a full-time job, been successful in a relationship, and one of my biggest dreams has been fulfilled--I have been able to return to school! I may not yet have achieved the grades I desire, but I have won in just being there and being able to complete a paper such as this. One year ago this all would have been impossible.

IV. Discovering Perspectives in the Field: "Experience-Near" and "Experience-Distant"

The final segment in the sequence is a culminating "self-assignment" in which I ask the students to create their own ways of becoming more familiar with the people, ideas, and practices in the fields. The students actually participate in their fields through a self-directed project, extending for several weeks in many cases. Few could write as powerfully as the Viet Nam vet, but even a beginning awareness of what the field is really like makes the project worth doing.

The responses to the final assignment have been impressive. One student kept a journal of his management experiences for a weekend at his father's truckstop. A speech pathology major observed work with a cleft palate in a speech and hearing clinic during the semester. An engineering student accompanied an engineer on a special assignment. An aspiring newscaster spent several weeks in the newsroom at a local television station. And so on.

Geertz suggests that we come to know a culture through symbolic structures, through the various manifestations of self-concept. The newcomer in gaining some sense of the ethos or the conventions of how a particular disciplinary community understands itself and its relations with others experiences these symbolic forms as through a glass darkly.

They are not to be treated as arbitrary forms to be filled, however, but are, rather, to be assimilated, even questioned, in dialogue or dialectic as the newcomer gradually becomes a professional. The experience of the field at this early stage allows and affirms the validity of the student's questions and ideas before too much dogma precludes them. This is not to say that growing expertise and relationships in the field would not stimulate further creativity. But conventions often stifle originality.

V. The Continuing Dialogue

Cognition is more than rational process. As Georg Lakacs writes, Writing as learning and thinking, to cite the essay as a key form, involves "souls and destinies" (3). Although the ethnographic metaphor breaks down finally as the newcomer becomes a native of sorts, becomes an "insider," a professional with some degree of expertise, there is always more to learn. The "story" never is complete. The "expert" remains a questioner within an interdisciplinary community. The fields, the conversation, are always in ferment--or should be.

Works Cited

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURES. NY: Basic Books, 1973, 3-30.

Geertz, Clifford. NEGARA: THE THEATRE-STATE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BALI. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Geertz, Clifford. "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding." LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: FURTHER ESSAYS IN INTERPRETIVE ANTHROPOLOGY. NY: Basic Books, 1983, 55-70.

Geertz, Clifford. "The Uses of Diversity." MICHIGAN QUARTERLY REVIEW XXV, No. 1 (1985): 105-123.

Geertz, Clifford. "Slide Show: Evans-Pritchard's African Transparencies." RARITAN (1983):62-80.

Lakacs, Georg. "On the Nature and Form of the Essay." SOUL AND FORM. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1974, 1-18.

Winch, Peter. "Understanding a Primitive Society." UNDERSTANDING AND SOCIAL INQUIRY. Eds. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977, 159-188.

Works Cited

*The sequence, as it is described here, is an extension of papers read at two conferences: "A Place for the Major Field in Freshman Composition: The First-Semester Course" at the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July 6, 1983; and "A New Approach to Research in Second-Semester Freshman Composition: The Freshman and the Major Field," IUPE, October 7, 1983. The first-semester sequence (with some variations) also appeared in the PCTE BULLETIN, No. 49 (April, 1984), 23-38 (no copyright; permission to re-publish).